

WHAT ONCE WAS EDEN

CHAPTER 5: COMPETING FOR HOPE (PART 3 OF 4)

Sajani started by trying to get information from Farleesha. She saw the trader riding around a few times that morning, but the brown wolf never responded to her attempts to persuade her to come closer. The young wolf did see a few other people from the caravan she knew, but those ducked out of sight if they ever noticed her looking their direction. Alonzo kept a scowl on his face and didn't say anything. Everything seemed a little harsh for what was basically a couple of pups having a spat...and what was this about her biting people? Finally, the silence was too much for her. "Am I allowed to talk?" she asked softly.

Alonzo's expression softened. "Yes, of course," he said not unkindly. "You just gave us all a bit of scare is all."

Of all the things that had happened that morning, that made the least sense. "It was just a stupid argument," she said sadly.

The guide didn't answer at first, but eventually he said softly. "I think most of the caravan will agree. Just about everyone heard the last part at least." There was a wry smile across his face.

His earlier words came into focus. "And what scare? It's not like there was anything violent happening."

Alonzo didn't answer for a while. "You know," he said carefully. "I do this job because I rarely have to deal with people. I talk to the *vhemato* and she talks to everyone else."

Was this even leading anywhere, or was he just changing the topic?

The guide continued. "I don't always catch things like how people feel, and I don't bother trying to figure out what others think, but..." There was another long pause. This was already deeper than anything she'd heard from him before. "...I do know when people are afraid. It's hard to miss. Some are afraid just being in such a stark place." He turned and looked at her directly for the first time since the argument. "I'm guessing you don't see that in others."

Sajani looked down at her feet. She wasn't sure she liked the direction this was going. True, she didn't pay attention to whether someone might be afraid—or felt any other way for that matter. Other people's feelings in general, she didn't care about...with one exception.

"Don't take it as an all bad thing," he continued, "but there's only one person in this caravan that isn't afraid of you," he looked back at the horses. "And that one person," he added, "isn't yourself."

She wasn't sure she understood the last part, but the first part worried her more. "I'm glad you're not afraid of me, at least," she said glumly. Moving her feet up onto the buckboard, she hugged her knees to herself and moped.

"I didn't say I was that one," he said quickly. "I shouldn't need to tell you who it is."

She knew. He might be afraid of expressing his feelings to her, but he wasn't afraid of her personally. "I don't know what there is to be afraid of," she said sadly.

Alonzo let out a slight laugh. "Well," he said slowly, "maybe saying they're afraid of *you* isn't quite the right way to say it." There was another long pause.

Sajani was getting the impression that the guide was trying to pick his words very carefully...almost like *he* was afraid.

He managed to get enough of his thoughts together after a moment. "There're very few in this country or our own that hasn't heard of what your mother accomplished. I've seen you use that to your advantage often enough that I'm guessing its second nature, but you don't seem to realize that people also know that to do what she did, she had to be quite the fighter."

It was starting to finally make a bit of sense to her. "So," she said with deep melancholy, "people assume her daughter is vicious..." Was that why some people did things for her? Out of fear? "I'm sure that's not why people treat me the way they do."

"And for the most part," Alonzo added quickly, "you're right. I personally find you to be harsh but amusing...a lot like the desert I travel...and the *vhemato* that employs me." After a brief pause, he added quickly, "um, don't tell her I said that."

The copper wolf managed a smile. From what little she'd seen of Farleesha, the merchant probably wouldn't care.

Alonzo continued. "But Zant...Zant fears you a lot."

The gray she-wolf seemed far too nice...to at least one person...that it seemed unlikely she was afraid. "Zant's too nice be afraid," Sajani smirked.

"It's the fact that she's nice that tells me she's afraid," Alonzo explained. "A person like that only gets aggressive if she's afraid."

Sajani's cynical side came into the conversation. *That can definitely be used to my advantage*, it thought. The copper wolf squelched that. "This is some nice deep philosophy," she said sarcastically, "but I still have no idea what it has to do with why we all have to be on opposite sides of the caravan." Sajani honestly didn't care about being separated from Zant. Gregor wanting to be somewhere else though...that hurt.

Alonzo laughed, "You're the *kalura*. The *vhemato* was afraid you might bite someone."

Well, if she was honest with herself, she *had* wanted to claw and bite. She'd been mostly sure she wouldn't.



It was at times difficult for the National Alpha to pretend that he didn't notice something. It wasn't that he wanted people to think he was foolhardy, but he did want to maintain a congenial level of approachability. People that realized he was quick enough to notice that there was a small and very fresh

scratch less than a millimeter in length on his office doorknob, might be more cautious in talking to him.

Not only could he see the mark, he could tell what kind of tool had made it, recognize that the tool was very new and see that the person using it was very skilled. There were no marks on the edge of the keyhole where the lockpicks would have rested as the tumblers were moved. The mark then meant that the person was using an unfamiliar set and misjudged the length and sharpness of the tool.

Looking over both his shoulders, the old wolf checked to see if anyone might be around. The outer office looked and sounded empty, as usual. Once he felt assured no one was watching, he squatted and gently touched one finger to the doorknob where the mark had been made. Looking closer at that confirmed his suspicion. He was pretty sure who'd been to his office.

Benayle unlocked the door and took a step inside, throwing the light switch even though he had no need of it at this time of day. He sat noisily in his chair and spun to face the curtains. There'd been a laugh on his lips for a bit and now it came out naturally. "Lady Mishal, there's a reason why those curtains are about the only thing in here that can hide a wolf."

His Minister of State stepped from behind the mentioned curtains. "It was more to keep anyone else from seeing me here. The gossip's been almost rabid lately, so I didn't dare call you into my office either. I thought I could stay hidden a little longer, just to have some fun."

The Alpha chuckled. "New lock picks that were a little longer than what the person usually used, coupled with the fact that the Ministry changed the standard issue. I was also pretty certain you wouldn't trust anyone else to break into my office."

Mishal sighed. "You saw the scratch then?" She balled her fists up and shook them. "I thought about using some oil to hide it, but I knew you'd smell that."

Benayle motioned to a chair next to his desk that he'd placed there that morning. "Have a seat, Miss Foxworthy, and tell me all about what you learned of our two young fugitives."

Mishal took the proffered seat and pulled a small object from her shirt pocket. It expanded into a file folder and she handed it to him. "Just got an emergency message from that operative who saw the pups a week ago. Here's his report."

Benayle set the folder on his desk and turned back to his Minister. "There're couriers for things like that. Why else did you come?"

The she-wolf wrung her hands nervously. For all the years he'd known her, he'd never seen her this worried. "It's all in the report," she said evasively.

Benayle put on his most charming half smile and looked her in the eyes. "Talk to me Mishal. I can read the report, but..." He waited patiently for her to complete his thought.

The hand wringing continued. “The reward for those two is getting higher and there’re at least a-hundred foreign bounty hunters now employed to catch them. The king doesn’t care if they’re taken alive or not. Our operative has *neutralized* a half dozen so far, but he’s requested help.”

The last statement seemed to have something else to it that wasn’t being said. “You sent some?” the Alpha asked.

Mishal slowly shook her head, “I have little to spare. I need most of our people to stay where they’re stationed, or we risk missing important information. On our other paw, our person there *must* hold his ground. He’s very... capable and the fact that he feels like he needs assistance worries me.”

Benayle leaned far forward in his chair and clasped his hand before him. “I can see why you’re so worried,” he sighed.

“It’s not all bad news, Ben,” she said with worry still in her voice. “Cyan is about a week behind them.”

Cyan? As in Cyanide?” Benayle asked. Her comment worried him, even it was supposed to be good news.

Mishal laughed nervously. “No, as in the color. Let’s see what’d you call him? No matter. That wolf you sent after her—he was still tracking our pups. The operative notes that no information was dropped off. Your secretary left immediately.”

Benayle shuddered. If that was the only good news she had for him...

“Cyan’s one of our best,” Mishal said monotone. Her voice nearly cracked, “but it’d take divine intervention to save those pups. We need to consider the possibility that it might be better if they don’t...”

The Alpha didn’t allow her to finish. “No!” he growled. “You think the Lords and Council will tolerate it if Rhidayar kills the daughter of Malita?”

Mishal sighed deeply, “That’s why they’re hiring foreigners, they’ll disavow all knowledge and say they were merely trying to capture the slave.”

“Even if our Lords and Council were addled enough to actually believe that, it doesn’t relieve me of responsibility. *I* sent her there. Her blood would color my pelt.”

Mishal looked sadly at him. “Ben,” she said slowly, “is the death of a single pup worth the lives we’d lose in a war? Even if...”

Benayle politely interrupted. He wanted to shout. He wanted to growl and thrash and bite, but he kept his calm. “Your path also leads to war.”

She tried to speak again, but he stopped her.

His voice was calm and even, though that was the opposite of how he felt. “If those two groups would go to war to avenge Malita and you *know* they would... They’ll go to war to avenge her daughter. We have to save her, not just to keep my conscious clear, but to save our nation and the heritage she represents.”